

Mallai or Mallayya (c.1580-1636): The Merchant-Warrior of South India

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Introduction:

The Indian merchants played a great role in Indian history, particularly in the maritime trade and other activities. The western scholars have astonished to find their crucial role.¹ In fact, the records of European Companies reveal many interesting details about them. Of them, Mallayya Chetti appears to be the most favoured and as much hated merchant by the Europeans and Mohammedans, as he posed a great business rival.² He has been the much maligned and most hated merchant by the British.³ His role during 16th - 17th centuries in South India is studied. David W. Rudner⁴ has been silent about him, as perhaps, he was dealing with one group of Chettis in particular.

Origin of Mallayya Chetti: About the origin of "Chetti", there have been several hypotheses and theories⁵. However, as this name is found in the Post-Sangam Tamil works mainly in Imperungappiyangal in the overseas trading and commerce, it is evident that they were dominating the national and international trade and commerce in South India from first centuries⁶. Here, Mallayya as is evident was a Telugu Chetti. Geraldine Forbes mentioned that "Malaya family of Telugu merchants, founded by one Achyappa Chetti at the turn of 17th century" points to the fact that his family exercised great influence in south India. Even after the death, the British documents continuously mention him as if he was living. His name was used along with his brother's name. The Dutch documents too show the same trend.

The Puzzling Pulicat: The Dutch Gunpowder Factory at Pulicat⁷ makes any historian to probe into the details of it. Not only the Dutch got their Fort and factory built by Mallai or Mallayya, but also their required raw materials and goods from him. He was virtually acting as Minister of Sriranga - III, who came to power in 1642. Mallayya and his brother Komeri Chetti were famous local merchants and middlemen operating all over the Coromandel coast with their office at Pulicat.

Contradictions in narratives about Mallayya: The details about Mallayya have been contradicting in the Dutch, British and Mohammedan documents. His name is mentioned variously as Malaya, Molaya, Mallai, Mallayya, Mallai Chetti alias Chinna Chetti, Asrappa / Astrappah Chetti etc. His brother's name is also mentioned as Chinana Chetti, Koneri Chetti, Komeri Chetti and so on⁸. However, as they mention the names in the context,

mentioning along with his brother, it is evident that the same person is mentioned differently with slight variation because of their pronunciation and respective languages used. His year of death is noted as 1634 (C. S. Srinivasachari), 1636 (George D. Winus and Markus P. M. Vink), March 8, 1634 (Wil O. Dijk). About the defense of Udayagiri and alleged changing sides with European companies and Mohammedans etc., are intriguing.

Mallayya the Expert of Builder of Fort: The Dutch and British documents mention that Mallayya family was having many Forts in South India. He was having a fort at Teganapatnam (old Caddalore). That mention of Malaya, for instance was a lessee not only of Pulicat revenues, making the VOC his tenant, but at the same time also of the Danish fort at Tranquebar proves that he might have had control over those Forts. In deed, the Dutch requested him to build the Fort St. Geldria at Pulicat and Mallayya carried their request with his men. Probably, the design might have been according to the Dutch. His brother Seshadri Chetty was instrumental in building the Fort at Proto Novo (Sadhurangappattinam / Sadras). He was formerly was formerly a merchant of Proto novo and became the Company's merchant or broker from 1640. He was instrumental in attracting numerous settlers to the town, collected funds for erecting the town rampart and even established a market and a paddy bazaar⁹.

Mallayya and Pulicat: As Mallayya was mainly catering the needs of Indian cloths to the European Companies, he was having his headquarters at Pulicat with his factories. In 1608, the Dutch got permission to build a factory there with trading rights from Venkatapathi I (1585-1614), ruler of Chandragiri as a part of Vijayanagara Empire. Thus, Mallayya had to give the place to the Dutch and shift his headquarters to Udayagiri. Mallayya was having Udayagiri Fort, Nellore District under his control having an army and his power was eliminated by Mir Jumla in December 1647 by capturing Udayagiri and Pulicat in January 1648. Thus, his brother tried his best to recover Pulicat. Chinnana when turned against the Dutch, raised an army and made unsuccessful siege of the Fort St. Geldria (K. A. Letters, ddxci, 1 May 1646).¹⁰ It was under the Dutch and then in 1825, it came under the British control.

The Dutch and the British Fight for Pulicat: As mentioned, Pulicat was under Indian control initially, till

Venkatapathi I gave permission to the Dutch. Before that, Ethiraja, father-in-law of Ramadeva Raya was the master of Pulicat. Pralaya Kaveri was the name of the place and it was shortened to Pulicat by the European tongue. The Dutch Colony was there from 1606 in Pulicat and its neighbourhood was famous for weaving of different cloths - Calico, long cloth, muslins, chintzes (Chitties), Izzaree, Lungies, Moorries, Muslins, Palempores, Salempores, carpets etc. their fort of Geldria was strong enough to defy any attack by the Hindu governor of the locality. They kept the weavers within the walls of the fort protected so that they weave for them without any hindrance.

In 1611, Captain Hippon and Peter Floris, a Dutchman, who had learned the secrets of the Indian trade, sailed in the Globe to make a landing in Pulicat, but the Dutch foiled them. They sailed north to Petapoli, arrived there on August 18. In 1614, Hippon tried to trade, but failed. In 1619, a treaty was made between the Dutch and the English, so that the former gave a right to the latter to trade from Pulicat. The condition was that the English were "to have free trade on paying half expenses of the Dutch garrison".

In 1621, the British tried to have Joint venture with the Dutch in Calico cloth, but failed. So they settled 35 miles north to Pulicat at Arumugapattinam (Armgon) [or Durgarayapatnam?] in 1626 by building a small fort. As they could not manage, they had to shift to Masulipatnam. In Armgon, Francis Day was there in charge of Godown in 1637 and he used to enquire and procure Calico cloth at competitive prices. He used to sail from Armgon to Pondicherry and found out that the price of cloth at Madras was 20-30% cheaper and also found out there was no other European presence there. He informed his authorities accordingly with the suggestion that Madras was the right place for their activities.

In 1647, Mir Jumla, the Commander of Golconda defeated Mallai forces and exercised his power over pulicat. Thus, the Dutch had to be under monitoring of the Moors. Thus, the position and condition of the Dutch is characteristically recorded as follows ¹¹:

"The Moors but five weeks past had advanced with their arms within three miles of Pulicat and sent unto the Dutch Governor to surrender up their castle; and we did suddenly expect the same; but shortly after the Jentues (Raya's troops) came down with a great power, gave the Moors battle, routed their army and put the Moors to flight beyond Armgaon, where they are now gathering a head again, so the danger that we live in is yet unknown"

Castle Geldria, the Headquarters at Pulicat: As mentioned, Mallai / Mallayya was dominating in Pulicat. After getting permission from Venkatapathi, they came to Pulicat and decided to build a factory with fortification.

So they naturally approached Mallai and he helped them a lot as a Dubashi, broker and friend. His friendship and commercial relationship started in 1609 continued till his death in 1636. In fact, it continued thereafter also through his brother Chinana / Chinanna. Thus all their places were located and situated strategically near to Saltpetre available areas. Mallayya deputed his men for the construction of Castle Geldria and wall around it. A factory was established inside with facilities to the workers. They were paid heavily compared to others.

Mallayya procured saltpetre, sulphur and other ingredients for the manufacture of Gunpowder from different places - Masulipatnam, Nagapatnam, Madurai, Tutucorin etc. He supplied raw materials, purified / processed saltpetre according to the requirement and schedule of the Dutch Company. The quality of Indian saltpetre had been very good, as it gave maximum yield, of course huge profits in the European market. The proportion used for processing was 75:15:10 of Saltpetre, charcoal and Sulphur. The High-grade saltpetre was purchased at 10 pagodas or 52.50 Guilders (Dutch currency) for 480 lbs. According to another calculation, 2000 maunds of saltpetre were bought at Rs. 2.25 per maund in January 1628 and because of heavy supply, it was reduced to Rs. 1.50 only, but it was sold at Rs. 15 to 30 per maund in Europe.

The Fall of Udayagiri: H. K. Shrewani¹² mentions that when Qutb Sahi army under Muhammad Sa'id surrounded the Fort Udayagiri in June 1643, he took the opportunity to entice the commander of the fortress, Mallaiya, to his side and entered by a secret passage pointed out to him. For capturing the Fort, he was conferred with the title "Mir Jumla". However, as it was again liberated from the Mohammedans, it was again captured by Mir Jumla in 1645. V. Vridahagirisani¹³ also accused of Mallayya for changing his sides, *"Mallai had a large body of soldiers under him and took part freely, frequently changing sides, in the struggles of the Raya, the advancing Mohammedans"*. This has to be critically analyzed, as the British always considered him as their enemy. Once, he seized an English ship "Prosperous", as they did not paid dues to his colleague Raja Reddy of Armagon.

Mallayya's fight with the Dutch and British: A Dutch record¹⁴ which gives Malaya Chetti's original name as Asappa says that in the early 17th century Asappa Malaya and his brother Chinnana had a splendid trade with Pegu, Tennaserium, Kheda and Pera, and also Pulicat and the ports around the south point of India, Gingee, Tanjore and Madurai. Seshadri / Seshadri Chetti was another brother of Malaya / Mallayya Chetty. Till around 1644, they both made a profit of 20 and 30% by providing

the Company with guinees, sail cloth, rambustin, bolatins, tapechiras, madpollams, painted cloth and indigo, and on their own account they shipped still larger quantities across the sea.

In 1645, Mir Jumla attacked Udayagiri, a fortress in the Nellore district and taken over from Mallai. The operations against the Dutch at Pulicat ceased with the fall of Mallai power. In the south of Coromandel the VOC mainly use the services of the Hindu-Telugu merchant castes, the Komattis, Beri Chettis and Balijas as their brokers. Until past the middle century they as well as English depended upon a relationship with a Balija family headed by one Malaya, alias Astrappa Chetty, and later after his death in 1636 with his brother Chennana and his heirs; apart from supplying textiles to the companies and other typical mercantile operations such as overseas commerce, money-lending and wholesale merchandizing in imported goods, they also derived a major part of their income via speculation in revenue farming of coastal territories. Malaya, for instance was a lessee not only of Pulicat revenues, making the VOC his tenant, but at the same time also of the Danish fort at Tranquebar¹⁵. Similarly, the Dutch employed the Muslim Chulias around Masulipatnam and in Golconda as their textile brokers in the north of Coromandel.

The Dutch in their chagrin (vexation and annoyance) seem to have referred to these indigenous merchants as 'pirates'. For instance in their letter of December 14, 1652, they accuse the Portuguese of intriguing with '*that pirate Beri Rama Chetti*' to capture Dutch vessels in the gulf of Sind. Reference to the participation of Mir Jumla and Mir Kamaluddin occurs repeatedly in both the English and the Dutch records.

Mallayya was an intermediary between the Dutch and the Indians, the Dutch tried to play trick between Damarla Nayak and Mallai, as the former had in possession of many forts exercising his power. The Dutch assisted Mallayya, who had been made to supersede Damarla Venkatappa Nayak, some years later, i.e., founding of Madras; and he became the effective master of the coast around Madras. Mallayya was having a body of soldiers with them he was controlling the coastal areas and ports also. He was having a fort at Teganapatnam (Old Caddalore)¹⁶. He was a prominent figure in politics and trade of the coast for nearly half a century. Exploiting the struggle of the British, Portuguese and Dutch over Madras, Mallai tried to expand his power to cover Madras also. In 1644 Sri Ranga III replaced Damarla Venkatappa Nayak with Mallai alias Chinna Chetty. Mallai planned to spread his power covering Madras, thus confronting with the British. He demanded 50% of Customs duty collected by them, as he now occupied the position of Damarla

Venkatappa Nayak.

The British feared that if Mallai could control Madras, he might increase the customs duty adversely affecting their interest. Therefore, the English determined not to give up their rights and even confront and retaliate on Mallai for his attempts on them. In September 1644, when Golconda troops marched towards Pulicat, the British heaved a sigh of relief, as Mallai tried his attention towards the Moors / Musalmans. In 1645, the Dutch had quarreled and the Governor at Pulicat arrested Mallai's men and goods on the pretence that Mallai owed some money to them.

In 1644, the British wrote to Surat that Mallai and the Dutch had quarreled and the Dutch governor of Pulicat had imprisoned Mallai's people and taken away his goods on pretence that he owed some money to the Dutch Company. At this juncture, that Sri Ranga Raya came forward to help Mallai against the Dutch and to prosecute the siege of Pulicat with a considerable force proves Mallai close association with the King. The British purchased the goods seized from the Dutch at a lower price. The Dutch appealed to the King that Mallai had no authority to seize their goods and they even demanded to recover the goods from the British ships. Ironically, the British at Madras, ie, Agent Ive and his colleagues resolved to appeal to the King that Mallai had only legally acted under his orders in seizing the goods of the Dutch

Mallayya and the Dutch - the saltpetre wrangle: Originally, the Dutch were purchasing Gunpowder from Mallayya Chetti. Later, probably after getting permission from the King, they started manufacturing in their factory with the help of Mallayya family from 1620. However, the Mallayya family continued to supply the saltpetre to their factory. At one stage, it is evident that wrangle had taken place between the Dutch and the Mallayya brothers after 25 or 26 years trade understanding with each other. As Mallayya brother could not supply saltpetre to them or he did not want to do so, the factory was closed down in 1660.

The treatment of Indian Merchants by the European Companies: The European Companies though exploited the Indian merchants maximum to their advantage, their superiority or race complexity was revealed in their writings. They are characteristically mentioned as "Malabar pirates" in their documents! Though they were their rivals and competitors, as the Europeans could not learn their business nuances, they treated them with contempt as 'pirates'! It is quite natural that the offenders used to accuse others for their aggressive and violent activities. Mallai Chetti had seized the goods of the Dutch and the ship of the British for

violation of the code of conduct and trade agreement and therefore, the recording of such acts by them is not surprising. Similarly, the Beri Chetty might have taken action against the Dutch, the agreement violators. In fact, the VOC utterly violated the trade agreement and Tanjore action had gone to the extent of carrying out a siege of Tranquebar. Of course, the first VOC business adventure resulted in loss and cheating of Indian merchants. Thus, the Dutch too would have given a parting kick in their own way of accusing Indians!

Usage of pirates, criminals and thugs by the European Companies: The European Companies reveal that they used notorious pirates in India to revenge against the Indian rulers or merchants. It is interesting to note that Captain William Kidd (c.1648-1701), one of the "Devil's Twins: Captain Kidd and Blackbeard" was engaged by the British¹⁷ against Indians and as well as their rivals, the Portuguese. Kidd operated from St. Mary, in his piratical attack against the Portuguese, reached the Malabar coast, fought with the Portuguese 'Man-of-war' at 'Carawar', somewhere between Bombay and Goa. However, they cleverly mentioned Indian merchants as 'pirates'! The one example of kidnapping an Indian Princess, Meera¹⁸, selling her as a slave in Cochin, carrying her to Philippines and then again selling her in Mexico has been a glaring atrocity of the Dutch to be recorded in history and definitely, Indians have not indulged in such acts.

Conclusion :

The role of Indian merchants in the establishment of European Companies in India has been an important aspect in Indian history. They had acted as Dubhashis and as well as intermediaries in trade and commerce. Just like European Companies, as they came here crossing the oceans, the Chettis were conducting oversea trade with other countries and thus, they had to have soldiers, navy and army to protect their ships, goods and men. Thus, they were posing a dominant challenge to European companies. Playing double game with the Indian rulers at one end and the merchants at the other hand, they could slowly break the Indian domination in oversea trade, evidently with the connivance of Mohammedans.

The example of Mallai Chetty has been interesting, as seen and the historical sketch of other merchants has to be brought out, as they played an important role in dealing with the Europeans and others. Unfortunately, the Indian

materials are lacking in cross checking the claims of the European records and writings. Perhaps, S. Muthaiah¹⁹ has rightly remarked as to whether any of their descendants are traceable today. Anyway, it is right time for Indians to record the past and try to correlate with the Indian counterparts.

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- 5 Even in USA, there are Chettis / Chetty etc.
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